



July 8, 2009

## **GOP thinks Stender and Green are beatable**

**By Matt Friedman, PolitickerNJ.com Reporter**

There are not many legislative districts that are expected to be competitive this year, but Republicans think they might have a sleeper in District 22.

Former Scotch Plains Mayor Martin Marks, a dentist who ran for state Senate in the district in 2003 and for the Republican 7th District congressional nomination in 2008, is running for state Assembly with political newcomer Bo Vastine against incumbents Linda Stender (D-Fanwood) and Jerry Green (D-Plainfield).

It's a traditionally safe Democratic district, containing cities like Plainfield and Linden that help give the party a registration advantage of more than two to one over Republicans. But with an unpopular Democratic governor at the top of the ticket, and with Stender having been bloodied by two back-to-back congressional race defeats, state Republican officials are paying attention.

"I think we've got great candidates there. I think Marty Marks and Bo Vastine are putting together a nice campaign in a district that has some local issues at play in a year that will be Republican," said Republican State Chairman Jay Webber (R-Morris Plains), who's also an assemblyman. "I think it is a race to watch."

Republicans also like the fact that there are no competitive municipal races in Democratic strongholds to help turn out their base there.

They also have a ready-made campaign issue: the closure of Muhlenberg Regional Medical Center in Plainfield, in part due to lack of state aid.

Marks lost his 2003 race to state Sen. Nicholas Scutari (D-Linden) by 10%. There were some parallels to this year. The incumbent Democratic governor, James E. McGreevey, was an unpopular. Although he was not on the ballot, Republicans attempted to equate Democrats with him -- ultimately unsuccessfully. Scutari, for his part, had his own liability. He had to contend with a sexual harassment scandal involving the man he was tapped to succeed that year: Joseph Suliga (D-Linden).

Six years later, Marks sees several key differences.

"First of all, back in '03 the state Senate was the top of the ticket. There was nobody above me and there was no coattail effect. This year we have a strong gubernatorial candidate in Chris Christie, and every single poll you see at this point shows him with a comfortable lead," said Marks.

Marks also pointed to the fact that Democrats tried to get Stender out of the district as a sign of weakness.

Governor Corzine hoped to appoint Stender to the state's Board of Public Utilities, but Senate Minority Leader Tom Kean, Jr. (R-Westfield) exercised senatorial courtesy, refusing to sign off on the nomination. Stender then committed to running her fifth campaign in five years.

Stender is clearly the Republicans' top target, but Marks thinks Green is not invincible either. He does not expect to win Green's hometown of Plainfield, but thinks that the recent division in the Democratic Party there could suppress turnout.

Marks and Vastine face a major financial hurdle, however. The last available ELEC report, from May, shows that the two had not raised the combined \$7,600 that would require reporting. Stender has \$52,000 in the bank - a tiny fraction of the amount she raised in her 2008 congressional campaign.

Marks said that he and Vastine have held fundraisers since the last reporting period, though he could not recall how much he has raised. He's waiting to see if the state Republican leadership will come through with financial support that he

said they promised him when he agreed to run, and hopes to reach the six figure mark by the time the campaign heats up.

"Let's put it this way: I'm satisfied with the interest that [state Republicans] shown. In the coming weeks I can let you know if I'm satisfied with the support that comes our way," he said.

Stender, for her part, admits that the last incessant campaigning has taken, but thinks her political wounds have healed.

"The election last cycle was a tough one, and running those kinds of races are just physically grueling, and it does take time to recover. But I'm recovered, out there working hard and fully engaged," she said.

Nor does Stender consider her 2007 Assembly reelection results lackluster, although politicians saw them as a sign of weakness for a candidate who at the time was planning to run one of the most competitive congressional races in the country.

That year, Stender and Green defeated their unknown and unfunded opponents by a solid margin, though not by the type of blowout that political observers expected from a rising star in the party - especially when there were two Libertarians who most likely drew more votes from the Republican candidates.

"I've always performed well in the district. The last cycle was a low turnout year and I was still the top vote getter," she said.

Earlier this year, Stender brought up Marks' run to the right during the 2008 7th District Republican congressional primary. Marks won pro-life endorsements but finished fourth in a crowded field.

Today, Stender -- who like Marks used to govern a small town -- went on to attack his record in Scotch Plains. Taxes, she said, rose steadily while he was in office, and are going up again this year. And now -- one year after he left office - the town is being hit with a costly separate sewer assessment.

"That's all because of his stewardship of mayor," she said.

Marks, however, blames the state government for the rising taxes, and said that a state --imposed property tax levy cap forced the town to assess its sewer separately for the first time.

"Linda doesn't really know what she's talking about, and she should know better than that. When she was a municipal official in Fanwood, taxes went up precipitously. When she was a Union County freeholder, taxes went up precipitously. Can we blame her stewardship on that? I'm going to say no, because state government is really the source of the problem when it comes to property taxes," he said, adding that Stender - a legislator since 2002 - has become part of the problem.

The Republicans' chances of taking the district aren't great, and Democrats privately note that Vastine's relative anonymity makes things even harder for Marks. But Democrats may have to work harder to hold on to the seat than in most other districts.

"This may be a district where they might have to think about what their strategy is to hold on to it, because there are a number of factors that make it competitive," said Ingrid Reed, director of the Eagleton Institute's New Jersey Project.